

Guidance for engaging with the UNFCCC

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Introduction

The United Nations (UN) climate change conferences have been growing in size and complexity over the past two decades. They have become “monster events” attended by a variety of stakeholders including Government officials at all levels, industry representatives, environmental groups, members of the media, and researchers and scientific experts. The number of delegates representing higher education institutions at COPs is also growing. However, researchers at different career stages still grapple with drawing on their

expertise to support the [painfully slow] political negotiation process underpinned by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

This document lays out key tips to support academics with their effective engagement with the UNFCCC process. It provides insights into knowledge exchange mechanisms available to experts and observer delegates during and around formal sessions of the Conference of the Parties (COPs) and of the Subsidiary Bodies (SBs).

A couple of preliminary points first...

It is essential for experts aiming to engage with the UNFCCC process to understand the limitations of policymaking at international level. Negotiations at that level are driven by the Parties - States which have signed and ratified the International Convention in question - and decisions are adopted based on consensus. This means that the weight attributed to scientific evidence could be reduced in favour of advancing negotiations and meeting the requirements of the Convention which Parties have committed themselves to.

It is a good expectation management exercise for academics not to bank on swaying **Party delegates** during the sessions of the COPs to deviate from the instructions given to them by their national governments in the name of a better alignment with the best available science. Instead, as **observers**, they should aim to provide “bridging proposals” to help resolve negotiation deadlocks, or stick to “sense-checking” the proposals made by Party delegates.

There are two underlying sets of skills which researchers need to rely on for a more efficient and rewarding engagement with the UNFCCC process:



1. The emotional skill of managing one’s expectations about how much can realistically be achieved during COPs.



2. The intellectual skill of learning to creatively consider how research could *practically* support *Party delegates* with overcoming negotiation deadlocks.



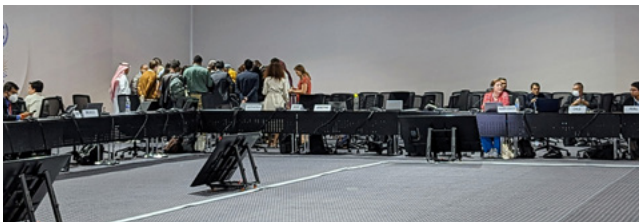
Key tips for engaging with the UNFCCC process during and beyond COPs

As observers, researchers play an important role in ensuring the transparency of the UNFCCC process. Therefore, there are a variety of mechanisms that have been specifically designed and integrated in the process to enable them to engage with it.



1 Seek to establish links with Party delegates and understand their respective positions with regards to contentious agenda items

Given that the negotiations under the UNFCCC are driven by the Parties, engaging with them directly is the most efficient way to influence the outcomes of the negotiations around various agenda items. Nothing in the UNFCCC process prevents observers from supporting Party delegates in their activities. In fact, observers are invited to attend certain types of meetings, and the Secretariat encourages them to collaborate with Party delegates outside of the formal sessions. However, it is important to ensure that you remain as relevant as possible, at the risk of being dismissed for stalling the negotiations in time-pressured settings.



The outcomes of UNFCCC sessions examined against the agenda items which negotiators failed to achieve breakthroughs around; the agendas, recommendations, conclusions, and reports from the meetings of the subsidiary bodies and the various negotiating groups under the UNFCCC process; and the different positions expressed by Parties as reflected in their submissions around agenda items could **all** be valuable indicators of contentious issues which scientific evidence could feed into.

Key tips:

- Focus on identifying the agenda items which negotiators failed to make progress on, track their history, aim to understand the divergent views on these items, and adopt a problem-solving attitude by perceiving them as opportunities for you to contribute to the debate.
- Stay updated by regularly referring to the **UNFCCC submission portal** to access submissions made by Parties and understand their positions with regards to various agenda items.
- Refer to the **UNFCCC documents and decisions portal** to read reports produced by relevant bodies and the national communications from the Parties (including Nationally Determined Contributions).
- Translate your research findings into practical suggestions to help Party delegates overcome negotiation deadlocks.
- Align your future research activities with the contentious issues on the agenda.



Consider sharing your insights by making submissions to the **UNFCCC submission portal** with respect to calls which are open to observers, or by supporting Party delegates with their own submissions; or participate in side-events and exhibits where you could share your findings with a variety of stakeholders with an vested interest in the contentious points on the agenda.

2 Participate in the activities of *ad hoc* committees and working groups

The COP and the **Subsidiary Bodies** often establish ***ad hoc* committees and working groups** to address specific issues and make progress on action plans and work programmes under the UNFCCC framework. They also establish bodies which are primarily concerned with establishing new mechanisms for funding, capacity-building, and technology transfer. *Ad hoc* committees and working groups have their own agendas and meet throughout the year (see [here](#) and [here](#) for example). They also usually have a balanced membership, representing Parties from different groups and often engage with external stakeholders, including observers.

Some invite observers to submit expressions of interest to support their work. But researchers also have the opportunity to make submissions via international organisations they might be collaborating with (e.g. UNDP, UNICEF, FAO) to support these working groups and bodies (see the **submissions to the Transitional Committee** for example).

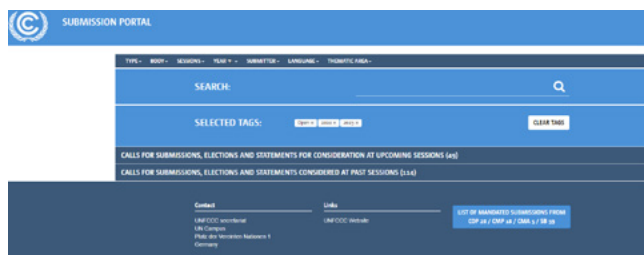
Key tips:

- To prepare yourself to engage with these groups, trace their mandate to gain a better understanding of the context of their work, and monitor their activities, particularly the calls for submissions they launch.
- Build networks and collaborating with other researchers and with international organisations that have an interest in the work programmes in question and are proactive in the area(s) of research which relate to them.



3 Contribute to shaping the agenda by making submissions or participating in meetings.

As an observer, you can contribute to agenda-setting by providing input on **mandated calls for submissions**, and by participating in events such as Townhall meetings and Open Dialogues. For example, observers can suggest topics to be included on the agenda of various work programmes under the UNFCCC by making submissions to calls which are open to them or by feeding into the submissions made by Party delegates; whereas the Open Dialogues provide invaluable opportunities to persuade presiding officers and the Parties about issues which need to be considered in future meetings and sessions.



Key tips:

- While contributing to activities such as the Townhall meetings or Open Dialogues, it is good practice for researchers to liaise with **Research and Independent Non-Governmental Organizations** (RINGOs), the second largest UNFCCC Non-Governmental Organization Constituency, whose focal points could offer valuable channels of communication with the Secretariat and the COP Presidency.
- Keep a look out for calls for submissions which are open to observers, but do not dismiss the opportunity to support Party delegates with their own submissions. Build links with Party delegates responsible for making these submissions outside of COPs.

4 Networking activities

Organising or participating in side-events and exhibits at the COP Blue and Green Zones is a valuable soft power approach to influence attending Party delegates. Crucially, these can also allow you to build links with other stakeholders from around the globe, including other researchers and industry representatives, with whom you could collaborate on research activities beyond COPs. Side-events which are organised by the UNFCCC Secretariat are considered “official”, but you could also organise and/or participate in events taking place at various pavilions in the Blue Zone or Green Zone or even off-site.



Key tips:

- Consider building collaborative relationships with stakeholders from varying backgrounds and different career stages before, during and after COPs. Tap onto your existing networks and exchange them with other participants to expand each other's connections.
- Be concise and memorable – use “elevator pitch” approach and briefs when presenting during events.
- Think long-term – use these events as an opportunity to connect with and influence attending Party delegates who can feed your insights to the negotiation rooms or continue to engage with you beyond the COP.

5 Contribute to knowledge around climate change.

Remember that you can also indirectly engage with the UNFCCC process through contributing to academic literature. Clear pathways to achieve this include feeding into scientific assessments (such as those conducted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), or by collaborating within existing programmes concerned with systematic observation and early warning systems (such as the World Meteorological Organization and the Global Ocean Observing System). The Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (**SBSTA**) acts as a link between the scientific information provided by such expert bodies and the policy-oriented needs of the COP. It also provides a setting for climate change research discussions and knowledge exchange through **Research Dialogues** which are specifically designed to fulfil the calls for further research on various aspects of climate change as mandated by the COP decisions.

Key tips:

- Contact **RINGOs' focal point(s)** to liaise with SBSTA and find out about opportunities to engage with existing programmes and bodies involved in scientific assessments and systematic observation, and to make interventions during Research Dialogues.
- Note **RINGOs' Thematic Groups** and proactively engage with those that are most relevant to your research background. Aim to address one or more of those themes when producing peer-reviewed publications, and highlight them in your publications.





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